

The *CounterText* Interview: Marie-Laure Ryan

Marie-Laure Ryan and Giuliana Fenech

Introduction

Marie-Laure Ryan's extensive body of work on narrative theory, media theory, and representations of space is particularly relevant to the theme of this special issue. As early as twenty-five years ago, starting with *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (1991) and moving on to *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory* (1999) and *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Electronic Literature* (2001), she was already addressing remediated forms of storytelling and avant-garde technologies, including the possibilities stemming from Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR). Her work has consistently discussed how new forms of creating, producing, and receiving stories challenge established narratological as well as cognitive models, and looks at how perception, understanding, and experience are constantly being reconfigured in the process. In *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling* (2004) and *Avatars of Story* (2006) she has studied the ways in which particular media affordances shape narrative forms and affect the narrative experience in relation to visual, gestural, electronic, and musical modalities in storytelling.

This work is continued in *Intermediality and Storytelling* (2010), edited with Marina Grishakova, *Storyworlds across Media: Towards a Media-Conscious Narratology* (2014), edited with Jan Thon, and *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015), where Ryan draws attention to the medial turn in narratology. She revisits and readapts traditional narratological analysis to media forms such as graphic novels, musicals, television, photography, and advertising, among other practices. Quite simply, therefore, Ryan's insights into what the multisensory may mean in a digital, connected world are important because she has been studying what happens to narrative traditions and the

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(para)literary for long enough to be finely discerning about passing trends, insignificant turns, and true game-changers.

Ryan's responses to the questions in this interview on multisensory encounters with the literary are thought-provokingly and critically anticipative. They facilitate reflection on the ways in which the multisensory may be positioned alongside immersion and interactivity when developing and engaging with stories and storyworlds born from contemporary affordances. She challenges idealistic predictions of how technological developments may contribute to storytelling techniques, whilst drawing attention to spaces that have a longstanding relation with understandings of the literary and the poetic—such as, for instance, the garden—but that may be ripe for thinking anew. She responds to the challenging question of how established narratological frameworks can be used to describe experiences of the multisensory, to how children's literature has long provided examples of multisensory works, to how the distinctions that suggest themselves in terms of textual, visual, and auditory histories—and in 'omnisemiotic' texts, as one might say in contexts pushing to the fore multisensory encounters with the literary—become ever more urgent.

The Interview

GF: Marie-Laure, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. A number of articles in this special issue of *CounterText* study the idea of multisensory encounters with the literary through narratological models that you have worked on extensively. In your opinion, which narratological frameworks are best placed to discuss human experiences of the multisensory?

MLR: Narratology, in its classical form, is concerned with monosensory language-based narratives, which means with narratives that speak to the mind, not directly to the senses (language asks us to imagine sensory experiences, but it does not convey them directly.) It seems to me that film studies was the first discipline to combine an interest in both narrative and the multisensory. But now narratology has awakened to the multiple media in which narrative meaning can be conveyed, and this leads to an interest in the particular sensory dimensions that each medium encodes. There has been an avalanche of work on the relation of language and image, whether in comics or in so-called multi-modal novels—novels that use lots of images and photos, such as the work of W. G. Sebald. More recently, narratologists have become interested in the role of sound, either in monosensory narrative such as audio plays or in combination with other modalities, as in movie sound tracks. I'd like to mention in this respect the groundbreaking anthology edited by Jarmila Mildorf and Till Kinzel, *Audionarratology* (2016). [Mildorf and Kinzel feature in these pages too, with an article on radio drama that adapts literary fiction by Philip Roth.] What's next? Can there be a narratology that takes touch into consideration? Some computer games produce vibrations of the controls when the player succeeds in a task. And the recent novel *S.* (2013), by

J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst, is full of 3D, touchable objects. We had seen this dimension before in children's activity books, but now the idea is being adopted by grown-up literature. In fact, I believe that many of today's literary experiments, especially multisensory ones, rediscover features that have long been used by children's literature.

But no matter how much narratology opens itself to the multisensory, I think it will be very difficult to describe the multisensory experience, which like all subjective experiences, is a cognitive and also phenomenological issue. I feel that artistic or textual experience is so personal, so variable, that it is almost ineffable. Perhaps we should leave it to creative authors, such as Marcel Proust in the madeleine episode, to tell us what it feels like to have one's senses overwhelmed with stimuli.

GF: Would it be accurate to say that our understanding of the multisensory is strongly associated to the ways in which we experience and perceive immersion and interactivity?

MLR: Immersion, interactivity, and the multisensory are the way we experience the world in real life. We are inseparably part of the world, we know that we can act on it and that it can act on us in return, and we experience it through all of our senses. So ideally, if art is to create a full alternate reality, it should provide all three dimensions. But this view is utopian, and I am not sure that the goal of art should be to fully 'remediate' reality, to use the expression of Bolter and Grusin (1998). Immersion, as I conceive it, is very compatible with the monosensory experience of standard language-based literature, since it can be the result of empathy for characters or of suspense, both effects at which traditional literature excels. On the other hand, images are much better than language at conveying yet another form of immersion, which I call spatial, and which consists of a sense of the presence of a surrounding world, of a corporeal relation to this world. As for interactivity, again, it can occur in both monosensory and multisensory environments, but in my book *Avatars of Story* (2006), I distinguish an external interactivity, which consists of manipulating a text or a world from the outside, from an internal interactivity, which consists of impersonating a member of the world. It seems to me that in order to provide the proper environment for internal interactivity a work must provide a richer sensory experience (mostly visual and auditory) than the external type, which occurs in such monosensory texts as classical (text-based) hypertext. In internal interactivity the user is surrounded by a world, while in external interactivity the world is apprehended from a distance. This idea of surrounding presupposes a close relation to the virtual world, the sense that its objects can be picked up and touched, and that I can get closer to or farther from them. This sense of proximity, of belonging to a world, which depends to a large extent on a rich visual and auditory representation of the virtual world, should be more conducive to interaction and active involvement than the distant relation of external interactivity.

GF: In *Avatars of Story* you also discuss metalepsis, of the rhetorical and ontological kind. Can we claim there are paradox-inducing narrative strategies in metalepsis, that allow for texts to be developed more multisensorially, or, perhaps, that these strategies allow us to understand multisensorial texts as such, when we come across them?

MLR: Metalepsis can happen in all media capable of narration, from monosensory literary texts to multisensory films and video games. Because there can be verbal, visual, animated, and perhaps also auditive metalepsis, the phenomenon transcends sensorial categories. And yes, metalepsis introduces paradoxes in fictional worlds, just as time-travel does. But to answer your question, I am not aware of a use of metalepsis that plays with the multisensory, that makes us more sensory-aware.

GF: Yes, establishing a model that specifically allows us to identify the multisensory is difficult because, as you say above, it is not only subjective but also a cognitive and phenomenological type of experience. However, in *Narrative / Science Entanglements: On the Thousand and One Literary Lives of Schrödinger's Cat* (2011) you use the Schrödinger's Cat experiment in order to draw parallels between scientific methods and narrative strategies. I quote, 'These needs in turn lead to four main strategies for moving from the parable to stories with greater narrativity: (1) turn the cat into a character; (2) turn the performance of the experiment into an event; (3) create suspense by making the outcome uncertain; and (4) use the story as a pretext for reflections on the problem of knowledge' (2011:117). I can't help wondering, could this also be a description of the narrative relationship between literature and the multisensory?

MLR: Do you mean the problem of 'narrativising' the multisensory, of building stories that crucially depend on the experience of multiple senses? This certainly could be done on the level of plot: imagine a character who can see and hear but cannot taste or touch or smell. Then, a whole story could be built on the acquisition of these senses, and at the end the character would experience the world more fully (this would be a sensory version of the folklore theme of learning fear). I imagine that an installation or a game could also dramatise the acquisition of multiple senses. At the beginning the visitor would be blind, deaf, incapable of moving, and so on. Then, she would gradually acquire other senses, and at the end she would see the world in its full glory. The outcome could be for a while uncertain, as in (3) above. And if the project is well done it would induce a deepened awareness of our senses, not just the most heavily used (hearing and seeing) but also those that are more rarely stimulated and therefore provide more lasting memories. This would be an equivalent of 4 above.

GF: And so, this brings us to the crucial question of form. What form are these stories most likely to take? And, more crucially, for the purpose of this issue of *CounterText*, what material form can literature be expected to assume in the coming decade? Will it still be recognisable to us as literature? What aesthetic, technological, sensorial dimensions will be associated with literature?

MLR: I assume that by *literature* you mean artistic texts that depend primarily on written language, and by asking about its future material forms you mean something other than the book. Or it can be an augmented book, such as Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (2013), which comes together with online documents that users can access by taking pictures of a bird symbol on some of the pages. In addition, I assume that you mean experimental texts. Will these experimental but still language-centered texts be some kind of digital installation? Some kind of designed VR or augmented reality experience? The digital allows the multisensory, but as the sensory modes multiply, language becomes only one type of signs among many others, so one can hardly speak of literature any more. But I doubt that purely language-based literature will ever lose its appeal. I envision a future (a future that is already happening) with two kinds of art: one kind that challenges the traditional distinctions between art types, and another kind that respects these distinctions. This is to say that the future of literature will include both monosensory language-based texts, whatever their material support (book or computer), and multi-sensorial hybrids supported by new technologies. Which technologies? I am not a prophet, but there is lots of talk these days that VR, prematurely announced as imminent in the nineties, has finally arrived or is just around the corner. VR will probably enhance the gaming experience without really requiring anything new on the level of game stories (so that shooters will be easily transposed into VR or augmented reality and will reach the same audience as their 2D predecessors), but what will it take to develop innovative narrative applications? As we hold this interview, a VR company named Wevr is working with a novelist, Janicza Bravo, to develop an interactive, 3D narrative, and I am eager to study the result, but we should not judge the literary or narrative potential of the technology on this first attempt, no more than we can judge the athletic ability of a child on his first steps.

GF: Your observations are thought-provoking and I cannot help but ask a further question on this matter. Without wishing to oversimplify too much, it's probably true to say that before German Romanticism, anything written – recorded through words – was deemed 'literature', so that even scientific treatises could be labelled as such. That usage of the word still has some currency, of course. Literature's developmental track in the mid-nineteenth century abetted its institutionalisation as a major form of cultural expression, conditioned also by commercialising and popularising dynamics. The aesthetic, technological, and sensory dimensions of literature depended more and more on what was perceived to be in demand and popular, on increasing awareness of *readerships*, at least to some degree. Do convergence culture, transmedia, and social media invite us to rethink the material form of literature, in any related way too?

MLR: One of the effects of the so-called 'media convergence' around certain cultural phenomenon such as transmedia franchises (*Star Wars* (1977–2017) is a prototype) has been the weakening (I am not saying total disappearance) of the boundary between

high and low culture. In the nineteenth century, novels by 'literary' authors appeared as serials in newspapers and the distinction between elite and popular culture was much less marked than it became in the twentieth century. The cult of innovation and subversion that characterises most of the twentieth-century literary movements deepened the chasm between 'high' and 'low'. The new media of film and TV were initially categorised as 'low'. So were computer games. Literature kept aloof from all these innovations and was regarded as the guardian of high culture. And since the formulae that had produced the great nineteenth-century novels were tainted by populism, literature had to keep experimenting, trying new forms, in order to distinguish itself from mass culture. This almost killed narrative (cf. the French New Novel). But nowadays, as I said, the boundaries between high and low are crumbling, and rather than being assigned wholesale to a certain level of culture, all media are seen as capable of all levels. See for instance the rise of 'quality television', the recognition of graphic novels as potentially serious art, and the recognition that video games can do more than feed the obsession of socially challenged male teenagers locked up in their basements. Literature has lost its prestige as the guardian of high culture, or rather it must learn to share this mission with other media, but this, is in my view, for the better.

GF: In your work on virtual reality you describe the multisensory as being omnisemiotic, or encompassing all forms of representation, action, and signification. Can you identify any works that fulfil this framing of the multisensory? Does it remain a mode that art and technology aspire to but have not, to date, fulfilled satisfactorily?

MLR: The kind of works that in my view come the closest to fulfilling a total sensory / mental / active experience (I say active rather than interactive, because the environment does not literally change as a result of the user's actions) are gardens: they satisfy sight, smell and sound (with bird songs, bubbling brooks, and wind in the trees), they provide an embodied kinetic experience of walking through and discovering new sights (plus their accompanying sounds and smells) and they allow a choice of itineraries. Written signs and statues can provide an embryonic narrative experience. You can add music. But the omnisemiotic is a chimera; there will always be types of signs, or types of meaning, that are excluded or that play a subordinated role. For all their sensory diversity, gardens do not give me the narrative pleasure that I get from novels, films, and comics. How could one emulate the garden experience in a virtual, rather than physical environment? The closest I have encountered in digital art is the work of the independent game designing team, Tales of Tales. Their games, *The Path* (2009) and *Sunset* (2015), offer visual, audio, narrative, and interactive interest through an easy-to-play game with a compelling story that takes the player through beautiful, well-designed environments. They are currently developing a VR-based project, *Cathedral in the Clouds* (2016), that should offer a multisensory, interactive exploration of the great cathedrals of Europe.

GF: So, is the multisensory a more organic / authentic mode of creating and sharing art in the globalised, capitalised (can we also say desensitised?) West?

MLR: This is an ideologically loaded question. If you mean by it that multisensory art represents an alternative to the stereotyped blockbusters that the entertainment industry is forcing on us, from the U.S. to China, then the answer is certainly yes, but this would be also true of any kind of creation driven by genuine artistic rather than commercial ideals. As for the multisensory being more 'organic' than the monosensory, well, it comes closer in principle to our unmediated experience of the world, but I don't expect technology to deliver this 'organic, authentic' experience any time soon. And, perhaps, it should not. There can also be artistic merit in providing a defamiliarising, unnatural sensory experience, an experience in which stimuli clash rather than harmonise making us rethink our relation to the world.

GF: Technological development allows media to experiment infinitely with different storyworlds that present us with 'unmediated experience of the world'. Do new media, however, instrumentalise the sensory, therefore allowing us to classify and categorise it into storytelling elements that are easier to apply to different storyworlds and creations?

MLR: Some media blend many senses into a holistic experience, for instance film, the opera, and even video games. This almost seamless blending could explain why narrative theory has long ignored the multisensory: sensory diversity is much more noticeable when the data clashes than when it harmonises. Some media compartmentalise sensory data into separate windows: comics is the prime example. Lev Manovich's idea of database is clearly a 'windowed' form of presentation (1999). While both the blending and the separation of sensory data can be put in the service of an artistic experience, I think the former is far more frequent. How much database art is there, really?

As far as classifying and categorising the sensory into storytelling elements, I think this project should begin with an assessment of the storytelling potential of individual sensory stimuli. Can one tell a story with sound alone? There are examples of sound effect stories on the Internet (for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-7eekV9gPc>, a video titled 'Telling a Story Using Only Sound Effects'), but their narrativity is very limited, and it is indeterminate, since listeners will imagine a wide variety of stories to explain the sounds. The narrative potential of a sensory modality is proportional to the diversity of the stories that can be told with it. Another task for a multisensory narratology is to evaluate the contribution of each type of sensory data to the total effect.

GF: This is complicated by the fact that, as discussed above, the sensorial is subjective, cognitive, and phenomenological. Your recent work, published together with Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu, in *Narrating Space / Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative*

Theory and Geography Meet (2016) invites further consideration of space and the possibility of experiencing the multisensory collectively. Can we ever experience the multisensory collectively, in particular in collective spaces, such as cities? Can we think of modern cities as collective multisensory spaces?

MLR: It depends. A large number of people can watch the same spectacle, hear the same sounds, even smell the same smell. That's why concerts and theatre and street shows can build communities in real time. Touch and taste are much more individualistic and therefore more resistant to collective experience, at least if we think of large communities. But shared meals create small but tight communities around the dinner table, and cooking is a multisensory experience. As for touch, well, holding hands in a large circle can create a sense of community, but it is the only sense, as Adam Gopnik observed in 'Feel Me', a 2016 *New Yorker* article, that hasn't inspired a form of art.

Cities are perfect stages for multisensory experiences thanks to their variety of stimuli, but I wonder to what extent one can call the experience 'collective' unless it is designed as a kind of street show. Don't we all experience the city in our own individual ways? What makes the city special for anybody interested in the multisensory is the density and variety of its offerings. It is this density that has inspired to Charles Baudelaire, and then to Walter Benjamin, the concept of *flânerie* – walking through the city without any other goal than to absorb the sights, sounds and smells, to which one can add street foods, that present themselves on every corner.

GF: Would you say, however, that phenomena like *Pokémon Go* (Niantic, 2016) or, even more interestingly, *Rider Spoke* (Blast Theory and Mixed Reality Lab, 2007) or *You Get Me* (Blast Theory, 2008), offer examples of ways in which we may experience the city more collectively?

MLR: Yes and no. Yes, these types of games take people to certain neighborhoods where they would never go otherwise, and they may promote a more comprehensive view of the city, a better appreciation of how it works as a network of different but interconnected spaces. No, if you are fixed on finding Pokemons, on killing enemies; in advancing in the game, you may become blind to the surrounding environment. Similarly, when you walk in the mountains, you appreciate the landscape better if you are a *flâneur* than if you are hunting for a rare kind of mushroom. But still, mushroom hunting may lead to a new sense of landscape since it takes us off the beaten paths.

GF: Perhaps, therefore, we could say that the multisensory allows us to construct or frame space and time differently. How may this be possible and how could we frame these differences?

MLR: We think of certain senses as primarily temporal (sound, for instance) and others as primarily spatial (sight), and certain experiences are spatio-temporal (the

experience of being a moving body); but artworks can play with sound in a way that spatialises it (think of stereo effects in music, of hearing the violins from the left and the cellos from the right; or think of the way sound effects in audio plays and video games can give the audience a sense of a character approaching or leaving the scene). Similarly, visual art can temporalise images: think of the way the eye wanders over a canvas, or of the way a body moves through a building, experiencing its architecture under various angles. The theatre, a multisensory art form par excellence, frames time and space differently from cinema, another multisensory art form. I believe that by involving a virtual body in a virtual world, interactive digital media have a still untapped potential for refiguring our experience of time and space.

GF: How is this any different to what literature has always done, placing fictional characters in fictional worlds?

MLR: The main difference is that in digital media the player controls her avatar and can choose what to do in the virtual world, while in literature, you see only what the characters see, you go only where the characters go, and you meet only the people that the plot takes you to meet. But to many people the greater freedom of the virtual world is less pleasurable than being taken by an author-constructed plot through a storyworld.

GF: Let's turn to the poetic, which *CounterText* has a special interest in engaging with. The poetic, the editors of *CounterText* would argue, is not bound to form or medium. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015), referring to poetry in particular, you state, 'Poetry is not as immersive as narrative' (2001: xx). How do you view the poetic, in relation to your work, and in relation to your thinking about the question of absorption in, transportation to / by, other worlds?

MLR: We must distinguish 'being immersive' from 'creating absorption in the text'. Both can lead to an aesthetic experience, but in different ways. For me immersion requires an environment to be immersed in: that is, a world contemplated by the imagination. Aesthetic experience can be a response to fragments of world and isolated images and sensorial stimuli. Poetry (here I think of lyrical poetry, not epic poetry) is for me too short to create a world. It also attracts too much attention to the materiality of its signs to be truly immersive, since immersion requires a certain transparency of the medium. There are works that create both an immersive and an aesthetic experience, works that are immersive but not really aesthetic (those easy-to-read narratives that give you a guilty feeling of enjoyment) and texts that are more aesthetic than immersive: here I place lyric poetry.

GF: This special issue of the journal also contains a paper, by Tamara Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz, that considers the multisensory dimensions of poetry and the question of whether poetry is translatable across languages. Would you say that the multisensory is translatable – not just across languages but also across cultures?

All humans have the same senses. Art that relies directly on the senses should be, in principle, more broadly accessible than language-based art, since it requires no translation. You can listen to music from India or look at prehistoric cave paintings and appreciate them without knowing the full cultural context, but you cannot read narratives in foreign languages and from foreign cultures without translation. But even sensory data is culturally coded: Western music is not the same as Eastern music, perspective-based European Renaissance art is not the same as Chinese or Japanese art. We can learn to appreciate art from other cultures without knowing much about these cultures' artistic conventions, but it would be simplistic to say that the multisensory transcends cultural boundaries. Moreover, if multisensory works are going to make some kind of political or cultural statement, this statement's reference will be to a certain political and cultural situation, so the work will not be automatically 'translatable' to other cultures. As far as I know (and I bemoan this fact) the most cross-culturally translatable works are the superhero stories that Hollywood dumps on us with increasing frequency.

GF: Would you say there is any particular reason why we should continue to study multisensory encounters with the literary?

MLR: I want to avoid subjecting multisensory projects to the kind of advance, hyperbolic theorising that greeted the development of hypertext and the idea of VR in the nineties; therefore all I am going to say is that we should devote to these projects the same attention that we devote to any experimental form of art. It is up to these projects, or rather to their authors, to demonstrate that they deserve special attention.

GF: And, to conclude, perhaps a slightly personal question. If you could choose one literature text to be adapted into a multisensory piece, which would you choose and what do you imagine the experience of it would be like?

MLR: Since media cannot yet reproduce all the senses, and since it is perhaps the least reproducible sensory perceptions that seem to have the most profound and durable impact on the mind, namely taste and smell, the 'adaptation' of a literary work into a multisensory piece would have to be a real-world experience, such as a visit of a landscape planned to provide the same sensory dimensions as the original work. In the case of Proust this could be a tour of a house similar to the one in Combray, with a taste of the madeleine and the smell of the dogwoods in the garden, followed by a visit to the church with its cool atmosphere and the wet smell of the stone walls. Then the visitor could be taken along the river and watch the play of ripples on the water, the swarming of insects in the sun, and the fish emerging from the deep to take bites. But maybe the experience would be terribly disappointing to the visitor, because the sights and smells and tastes that evoke rich memories are different for everyone. For me the most memorable smell experience is a smell in the mountains that occasionally strikes me for a few seconds along a path, and then disappears. I associate it with mushrooms, though I think it comes from something else because I have never found mushrooms

when the smell hits. But I am digressing! To return to the ‘sensory’ adaptation of a literary work, I think it is better to forget the idea and to let the imagination recreate all the sensory data. I’d rather picture the smell and taste of the madeleine mentally than dipping a real madeleine into a cup of tea and taking a bite, because when I recreate these experiences mentally, I imagine what they mean for Proust, while if I take a bite of a real madeleine, I only experience what it means for me—which may be nothing at all, or a bad memory (a relative serving madeleines when I had hoped for éclairs and cream puffs). Similarly, a 3D reenactment of Leonardo Da Vinci’s ‘Last Supper’ (1495–1498), where you could touch the characters and perhaps smell their robes or the food they are eating, would be a vast disappointment compared to watching the painting itself.

GF: Leaving us wondering, of course, whether this is the great resource that allows literature’s relevance to survive, even to prevail, despite the blurring boundaries between high and low culture and also despite the technological developments that are increasingly and perhaps a little unthinkingly perceived to be a threat to its monomodal form of storytelling. Perhaps, the power to ‘let the imagination recreate all the sensory data’ of any given space and time is what renders the literary relevant to the contemporary age of multisensory, immersive and interactive art, and the space of literature ever more interesting.

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8. Items to accompany post

- A short biography (ideally 25 words or less, but up to 40 words)
- A photo/headshot image of the author(s) if possible.
- Any relevant, thematic images or accompanying media (podcasts, video, graphics and photographs), provided copyright and permission to republish has been obtained.
- Files should be high resolution and a maximum of 1GB
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